

THREAT ASSESSMENT

ITAC

Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre

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SECRET

The impact of COVID-19 vaccination mandates within the ideologically motivated violent extremism milieu

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INTRODUCTION

The current ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) threat environment in Canada is fluid and rapidly evolving within a convergence of social, political and geopolitical factors. This paper assesses the extremism threat from IMVE adherents—particularly those motivated by anti-government and anti-authority beliefs and/or inspired by conspiracy theories—in the context of COVID-19 vaccination mandates being implemented globally and in Canada by governments and large institutions. s.38

A note about scope

Not all individuals who protest mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policies are motivated by conspiracy theories or IMVE. Some individuals are hesitant about receiving COVID-19 vaccines because of health reasons, concerns about the safety of the vaccines, and fears stemming from past negative interactions with the healthcare system. These individuals are not in scope for this paper. In addition, individuals who engage in non-violent criminal behaviour relating to mandatory COVID-19 measures (e.g., vaccine passport forgers) are excluded from the scope of this paper. s.38

KEY ASSESSMENTS

- ITAC assesses that mandatory vaccines policies being proposed or implemented by authorities such as the Canadian federal government, or pandemic circumstances requiring people to show proof of vaccination to participate in day-to-day activities, likely represents trigger points for IMVE adherents and members of society who are vulnerable to messages advocating violence as an acceptable expression of opposition. s.38
- While ITAC is not aware of an ongoing plot to carry out ideologically motivated violence, ITAC assesses that the implementation of vaccination mandates, particularly in the context of a federal election, will highly likely result in increased online and real-world threats from anti-government and anti-authority IMVE adherents who believe that vaccine mandates are a violation of personal freedoms or part of a wider government conspiracy. s.38
- ITAC judges that the vast majority of online IMVE threats are made by individuals with no intent to follow through with real-world violence. However, a growing number of posts to public s.38 have the likely intent to push individuals or small groups into supporting or manifesting ideological acts of violence. s.38

REACTIONS TO COVID-19 VACCINATION MANDATES

According to a body of media reporting, a growing number of governments and large public and private institutions in Canada and abroad have made COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory for employees, customers and visitors. Many other governments and institutions have implemented measures that indirectly make vaccinations mandatory. Indirect measures include ending nonessential free COVID-19 testing for unvaccinated individuals, potentially dismissing unvaccinated individuals from employment, and requiring vaccine documentation (e.g., vaccine passports, health pass, certificates) to access certain events and businesses. Most recently, the Canadian federal government announced that all employees of federally regulated industries, departments and Crown corporations must be vaccinated by fall 2021. This mandate extends to commercial passengers travelling by air, rail or large ship. s.38

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DEFINITIONS and HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS are located at the last page.

Canada

Canada

According to a body of open-source reporting, s.38 the pressure to be vaccinated to participate in regular society and the perceived infringement upon personal freedoms have provoked strong and sometimes violent reactions from certain individuals in Canada. Elected officials have been targeted verbally by protesters and have been threatened with violence. Healthcare infrastructure and healthcare officials and their families have experienced similar threats. Some individuals have threatened violence on pro-IMVE social media platforms, s.38

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While some known IMVE adherents in Canada have engaged in online rhetoric driven by perceptions of government overreach related to mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations, there have been few explicit expressions of violent intent. s.38

Canadian elections – September 2021

While there is currently no specific threat-related information regarding the 2021 Canadian federal election season, the election itself is a triggering event for many different IMVE adherents. Individuals can, and do, express social and political grievances during democratic elections. However, social unrest related to pandemic restrictions, widespread conspiracy theories, and a distrust in the democratic process have resulted in the prominence of ideological grievances for the 2021 election season. This confluence of events has led to a volatile threat environment in Canada. s.38

Global

Globally, since spring 2021, conspiracy theories and threats of violence relating to real or perceived mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations have persisted. In the United States, individuals continue to express conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric online, including threats related to bombs, kidnappings and civil war. Targets include elected officials, law enforcement, vaccination sites, public health officials and infrastructure, health workers, pharmaceutical companies and employees, and institutions that mandate vaccinations for employees and customers. There is a similar atmosphere in Europe, where there have been attacks on French vaccination centres and Dutch test facilities, as well as calls for attacks on Italy's power infrastructure to disrupt the country's digital COVID-19 vaccination certificate. Xenophobic imagery has been displayed at protests against health passes, and violent rhetoric targeting elected officials and media company employees has been posted online. In the Caribbean, an elected official was injured by a projectile during a protest against a possible requirement for most frontline health workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19. s.38

THE GENERAL IMVE THREAT LANDSCAPE**Intent and capability**

Some IMVE adherents espouse violent rhetoric with an intent towards violent resistance against COVID-19 measures and perceived government overreach. To date, IMVE actors have generally demonstrated an unsophisticated capability to undertake violent action. However, some IMVE adherents s.38 law enforcement experience that can increase their capability (but not their intent) to undertake violent action. For example, in spring 2021, a former soldier in possession of a variety of weapons threatened public health officials linked to Belgium's pandemic efforts. This threat was ultimately mitigated. s.38

Opportunity and triggers

The lifting of pandemic restrictions and the return of large gatherings, special events and travel can increase opportunities for extremists to conduct attacks. It is usually difficult to predict what events will trigger an extremist to undertake or incite opportunistic acts of violence, with the exception of major planned events like a national election. If any one of a variety of predicted or novel trigger events were to occur during this election period, it is possible that the confluence of events will increase the threat of violence from IMVE adherents. Possible trigger events that could occur in the near to medium term include further developments in Afghanistan that impact minority and veteran communities in Canada, an economic shock, a new lockdown mandate, or other mandatory pandemic measures. s.38

Targets

To date, threats by IMVE adherents have focused on political figures, uniformed personnel, symbols of government, healthcare institutions, and other institutions associated with pandemic and vaccine-related

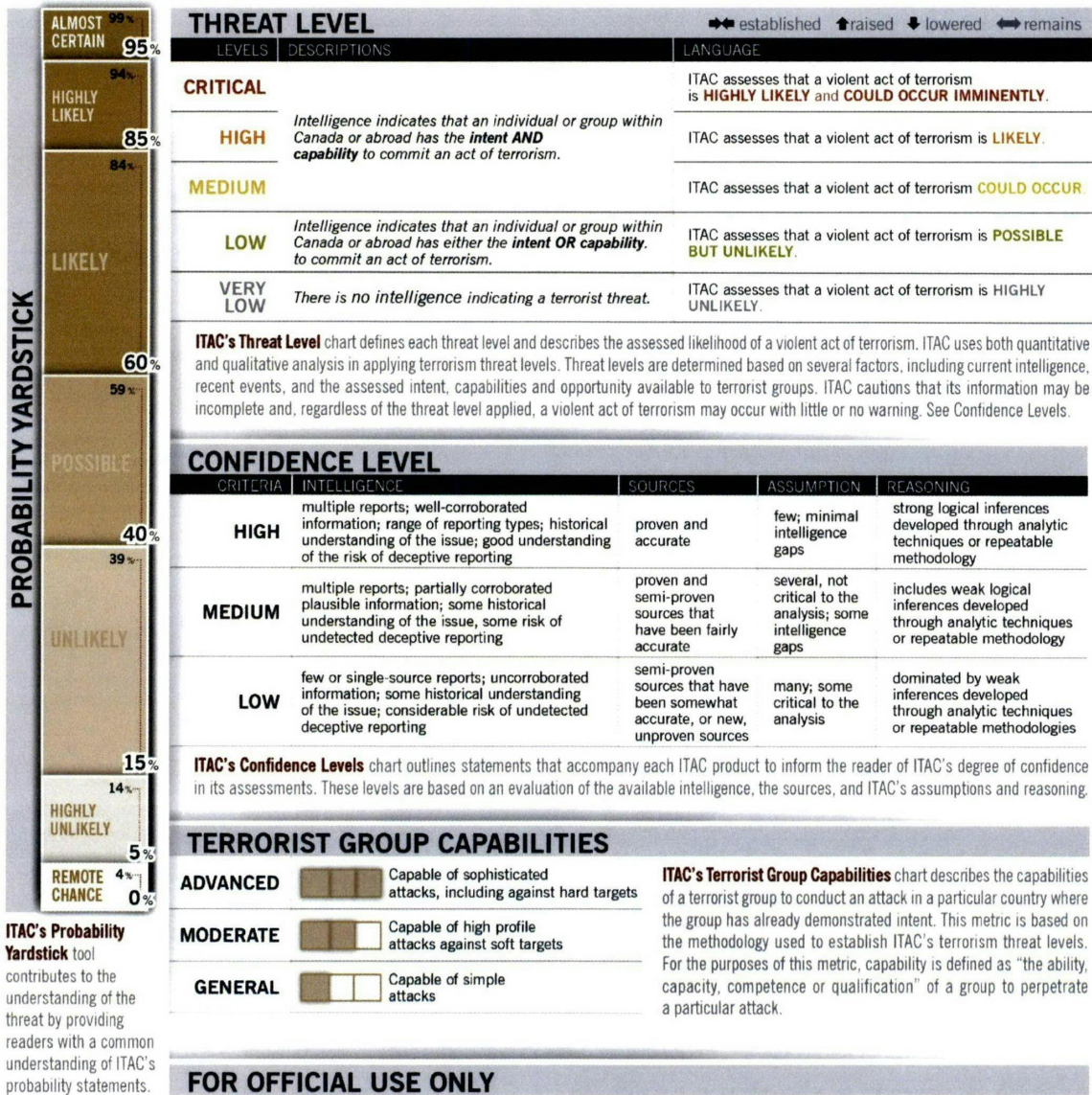


targets. Some individuals have argued online that violence against public health workers and "federal agents" would be justified in the face of "forced" vaccinations. s.38

ASSESSMENTS

- ITAC has no information at this time indicating that there are specific, well-developed plots against vaccine-related targets in Canada. Yet, it is likely that some anti-vaccination IMVE adherents in Canada who refrained from violence due to the voluntary nature of Canada's vaccination strategy will justify mandatory vaccines as a reason to mobilize to violence. Such mobilization can involve unsophisticated methods such as bladed weapons, firearms, vehicle ramming or crude explosives, all of which require minimal planning or capability and are thus difficult to detect. ITAC cannot discount the possibility that a small-scale attack against a visible and accessible target, such as a public vaccination site, could occur with little to no warning. s.3
- Institutions that have mandated vaccinations, and their representatives, could become targets of online IMVE threats or real world violence; members of the general public seen to be accessing their services could face the threat of collateral violence. Specifically, federal or provincial vaccination policies that are perceived to inhibit personal freedoms or unfairly target unvaccinated individuals could intensify the threat environment and lead to a violent response against vaccination centres and workers, vaccine advocates, political figures, or symbols of government in Canada. s.38
- Although peaceful protests do not equate to IMVE activity, ITAC assesses that IMVE actors could leverage protests or other large civil gatherings to conduct opportunistic violence. ITAC judges that it is likely that some IMVE adherents—particularly those who espouse anti-government and anti-authority beliefs—continue to draw inspiration from the violent breach of Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. These IMVE adherents increasingly view that event as a legitimate response to personal grievances. s.3
- ITAC judges that to IMVE adherents, there is little difference between mandatory vaccinations and vaccinations being required for participation in voluntary activities—both are interpreted as infringements upon personal freedoms. As IMVE actors are adept at co-opting broad grievances to expand their influence, ITAC assesses that the introduction of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination measures will enable IMVE propagandists to recruit others to their worldviews. s.38
- ITAC assesses that although some online contributors simply want to engage in and fuel IMVE narratives, others aim to normalize violence as a reasonable response to disagreements with public policy. This messaging may lead to susceptible and volatile individuals carrying out unsophisticated attacks in an effort to make their opposition known and create change. The possibility of an isolated violent act cannot be discounted in the context of vaccination mandates, new or reinstituted public health restrictions or rules, and the polarization of opinions and grievances surrounding the 2021 Canadian federal election. s.3
- ITAC judges that if an attack were to occur, it would likely be carried out by an inspired lone actor using low-sophistication weapons. Political and public health leaders, as well as related infrastructure, could be the intended targets of such an attack. s.3
- ITAC notes that underlying tensions related to vaccinations, particularly compounded by the current election period and any public health restrictions resulting from a fourth wave of COVID-19, could influence the mobilization to violence by IMVE adherents who already believe that their rights are being violated by vaccination mandates. s.3





HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS

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